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ABSTRACT

Advocating the creation of a school climate that allows staff to determine the match between their current practice and standards of excellence, this booklet describes a process and attendant conditions for conducting self-study, one such process that shows promise. Based on experience, the booklet offers several lessons about the self-study process for teachers in the early grades. The first category of lessons in the booklet focus on the common bonds that teachers of young children appear to share and what this suggests about the self-study process. The second category in the booklet revolves around the six critical areas of support needed to promote a professional and reflective climate: (1) offering real reasons to participate; (2) building trust slowly through meaningful work; (3) providing administrative support; (4) providing ongoing support for peer facilitators; (5) tapping into outside resources; and (6) building in reflection time. The booklet highlights these lessons, offering practical advice about the process to those who wish to engage in a guided self-study. Annotated lists of five additional readings and five self-study documents are attached. (RS)

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# Promoting Developmentally Appropriate Practice Through Teacher Self-Study

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# Acknowledgments

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Rebecca Severeide
November 23, 1992

For many teachers, the opportunity to construct their own knowledge about age-appropriate practice and early literacy is a rare experience. They are more accustomed to authorities telling them what and how to teach, than to reflection and experimentation.

Creating a school climate that promotes professionalism through a well thought-out process requires a commitment of time for guided reflection and non-evaluative conversation with peers about their field of endeavor. This can allow a staff to determine the match between their current practice and standards of excellence. Self-study is one such process with promise.

This paper describes a process and attendant conditions for conducting a self-study. The process, which is briefly outlined below, is based on criteria taken from the research-based philosophy of developmentally appropriate practice. This philosophy centers around the principle that learners make their own meaning through interaction with their environment. Even though learning is personally constructed, it still adheres to two other key principles: Development occurs in predictable stages and it has individual variation. Developmentally appropriate practice shares the same research base with other innovations in education, like early literacy. Both developmentally appropriate practice and early literacy hold that programs are only high quality if these principles are employed. More traditional approaches often miss one or more of these principles, failing to offer equal opportunity for all learners at all levels and from all backgrounds.

As educators who are trained in more traditional methods grapple with new understandings of the normative and constructivist underpinnings of developmentally appropriate practice and early literacy, questions and misconceptions about the application surface. An example of a questionable traditional practice is alphabet letter of the week. This traditional practice grew out of a well intended desire to offer systematic phonics instruction to young children. Yet, more child-centered approaches to teaching find that there are better ways to help young children make sense out of sound patterns in their daily lives. The self-study process described in this paper can assist teachers to examine tradition and seek alternatives when appropriate.

The self-study process delineated here involves a group of school staff working with a peer facilitator(s) to discuss and rate themselves on a set of quality criteria established by outside ex-

perts in the field. The criteria are organized into areas of school programs:

- Interactions among children and staff
- The physical environment of the classroom
- Health and safety considerations
- Parent, home, community communication
- Curriculum and instruction
- Assessment (Massoni, 1991; Severeide & Moilanen, 1991; Severeide, Massoni, & Moilanen, 1992)

Regular meetings are held to discuss individual teacher's ratings and to determine where the group stands. The conversation is focused to allow staff to voice agreement, puzzlement, or in some cases well-grounded disagreement with the criteria. This all can lead to a greater understanding of the criteria and current practice in a school. After discussion, staff can determine what, if anything, they wish to do about those criteria they do not meet. The goal of the process is to allow a staff to come to their own best judgment of their strengths and weaknesses on these criteria while concurrently developing a new sense of shared professional wisdom. They then use this new base as a springboard to refine their teaching.

***Teachers develop a new sense of shared professional wisdom.***

A guided self-study process offers a staff a multitude of opportunities. In addition to the important outcome of program improvement and a shared knowledge base among staff, self-study can promote leadership skills and increase self-confidence among staff. One veteran teacher describes these outcomes by saying, "I'm now at a point where I can figure out how it works for me. I remember when the trainers for *Distar* said it [reading instruction] should work a certain way. Well, it didn't work that way for me and I never felt comfortable with the program. Talking with teachers has helped me learn to trust my own judgment. It's [my judgment] not so bad after all."

Several schools in the Western United States are now using a self-study process. These schools have organized themselves in various ways. In some schools, the entire primary staff participates, including support staff such as counselors and media specialists. In other schools, just K-1 teachers go through the process. Other variations include K-3 teachers from several local schools in a year-long course offered for inservice credit. In another case, the entire kindergarten staff in a district formed a study group.

Based on the experience of participants who have developed these configurations, several lessons about the process for teachers in the early grades are offered. These lessons fall into two categories. The first focuses on the common bonds that teachers of young children appear to share and what this suggests about process. The second category revolves around the support needed to promote a professional and reflective climate. This document will highlight these lessons, offering practical advice about process to those who wish to engage in a guided self-study. Actual sample documents for use in the process are referenced under "Self-Study Documents" at the end of this paper.

## Knowing Who We Are: Commonalties Among Teachers of Young Children

Regardless of work assignment or type of school, commonalties appear to exist in teachers of young children. An obvious one is that the vast majority are women. There is a growing body of literature suggesting women learn and process information differently than men. Yet colleges, universities, and staff training programs are traditionally based on models designed for men (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986). In *Women's Ways of Knowing*, Belenky et al. found that women go through learning stages unique to them. They tend to progress in a general pattern of:

- Listening to experts
- Listening to their intuition
- Listening to reason and logic
- Learning to work with others
- Constructing their own knowledge by integrating the above

A second common bond among teachers of young children is a similar value system. When asked to rank order common school outcomes such as social competence, problem solving ability, positive attitudes toward learning, language and literacy development, and academic skills, the social and attitudinal items rank higher than the academic. While school is traditionally the place in our society where the young learn to read, informal conversations with teachers suggest that they often feel caught in a bind between their values and traditional practice. They report a struggle with finding ways to teach children important academic skills while promoting positive social behaviors (Massoni, 1991; Severeide & Moilanen, 1991; Severeide, Massoni, & Moilanen, 1992).

If we wish to honor the teaching principle of knowing the learner (teachers of young children in this case), we should take these lessons seriously when promoting new teaching techniques. Staff development efforts need to be structured to help teachers work together while still using expert information so that personalized, but professional, knowledge is gained. The ideas put forth should also assist teachers in nurturing both children's social and academic needs. The notion of attending to the social context of learning may not only be productive for children, but it can also reduce the stress of teaching caused by the conflicts in values that many teachers report.

## Building a Professional and Reflective Climate: Six Critical Areas of Support

Process counts. The schools that engage in self-study as a way to examine their teaching practice, be it in literacy or other issues in a school, find that certain types of support make it easier to progress and help them function as a group. The key areas of support that make self-study succeed with teachers of young children are:

- Offering them real reasons to participate
- Building trust slowly through meaningful work
- Providing administrative support
- Providing ongoing support for peer facilitators

- Tapping into outside resources
- Building in reflection time (Severeide, Massoni, & Moilanen, 1992)

### Offering Real Reasons to Participate

Although the specifics vary, each group of teachers must have real reasons to be involved. Self-study is not a process that a school should undertake because it "sounds like a good idea." The majority of the teachers must feel that taking the time to discuss, think, write, and read about their practice has a pay-off. Not all need to be wildly enthusiastic, but each staff member must be satisfied that they have a real choice and will see results.

Without staff buy-in, administrative agendas accomplish little and the process is usually abandoned. However, in schools that involve the teachers changes occur. Staff seeking direction for the primary program may see the process as a chance to clarify their goals or long-range plans. Other staff may find it a useful way to see if they are reaching the goals they have already set. Some schools may find the structure and guidance helpful as they grapple with ways to meet the needs of a difficult-to-serve population that is not responding to more traditional methods. In a few buildings, the staff may need a structured way to talk and share ideas. In a building like this, staff members are often concerned about a negative climate and usually respond well to a process that can redirect their energy. Relevance is a strong motivation for teachers to engage in professional inquiry and incorporate new teaching practices.

### Building Trust Slowly Through Meaningful Work

Creating a climate of trust is a continuing part of the process. It starts with creating a tone that says, "It's okay to talk about what you really do, even if expert opinion says your technique is less than ideal." A psychologically safe environment is essential if teachers are to discuss and write about how they truly feel about their practice. Teachers report feeling pressured to "look good" at all costs. If they are to risk trying new practices and honestly discuss their efforts with their peers, they must be sure that all participants will show encouragement and help them problem solve. When a

***Creating a climate of trust is a continuing part of the process.***

climate of trust and thoughtful examination is carefully nurtured, dialogue rather than argument can occur.

Although trust is important to establish early in groups, it is not instantaneous. It is an outcome of work together. Four months into a self-study process in one school, a group of teachers who espoused a belief in child choice acknowledged, "Let's 'fess up. We don't really give children choices." After several months of being involved, a teacher in another school summarized the sense of trust that developed in her building by writing in her journal, "I am so grateful for this opportunity to share together with the primary team."

**Providing Administrative Support**

Since the principal has the role of evaluator, he or she should not attend self-study discussion sessions. Teachers need the safety of knowing that they can reflect upon their practice and experiment with new ideas without it affecting their formal evaluation. This makes leadership in a self-study process a balancing act. If the administrator does not show interest and support in the process, staff are likely to feel timid about their involvement, causing them to resist moving toward more appropriate practice. Yet, too much administrative eagerness may leave a staff feeling pressure to please the principal, as well as fearful about revealing their own concerns. However, the need for a slightly distant level of support is not to imply that the principal is not an important part of the team. A principal's interest in and ongoing support for self-study is a necessary ingredient for success.

Some examples of administrative support that teachers generally perceive as helpful are setting aside and honoring meeting time for the whole year, making sure that coffee and snacks are available for these meetings, having the facilitator make periodic progress reports to the whole staff at staff meetings, making efforts to obtain new materials that staff want to try, and occasionally taking over a class in order to free teachers to observe peers. This last support of freeing teachers has two elements. When an administrator is perceived to "be in the trenches" occasionally, staff have

more confidence that the administrator is in touch with the daily realities of the classroom. The second aspect of giving teachers time to observe is one of acknowledging the need for a shared knowledge base in the school.

***Leadership in a self-study process is a balancing act.***

The way a principal finds the balance varies with leadership style. Some administrators like to give the bulk of the responsibility to the facilitator or a team leader, taking a laissez-faire approach. Some like to be part of a support team for the facilitator, offering tips on how to make the meetings go more smoothly. Others like to be more directly involved by dropping in on the first five minutes of a discussion session and then reviewing the meeting notes with the facilitator. All approaches can work—if the administrator *truly* allows staff ownership and offers support from a slight distance.

**Providing Support for Peer Facilitators**

The role of the person who provides coordination and leadership for the self-study process is another balancing act, requiring someone to be both a peer and leader simultaneously. She may find the responsibilities somewhat overwhelming as she tries to guide agenda setting, create a climate of trust, involve everyone in the discussion, and help people with differing points of view listen carefully to each other. The facilitator can feel caught between different opinions, isolated, and unable to participate herself.

Since teachers who serve as facilitators usually have no special training in group process, support for them is a key factor to a successful process. Having someone in the school with whom to share the ups and downs, as well as the responsibility, makes the task easier and less lonely. One staff accomplished this by having monthly review meetings that included the facilitator, two staff members who served as behind-the-scene process observers, and the principal. The process was discussed and suggestions for streamlining were offered. Another staff provided support by having a school counselor join with a teacher as co-facilitator. The teacher had the respect of her teaching peers and the counselor

had the group process skills. They periodically met alone and with the principal to problem solve.

**Tapping into Outside Resources**

Some form of support and perspective from someone outside of the school is vital. Offering training in group process, sitting in on a debriefing meeting, providing disinterested secretarial help in compiling individual rating sheets into summaries, lending a sympathetic ear, offering suggestions when problems arise, and being there to celebrate with a facilitator when it goes well are examples of valuable outside support.

While one of the goals of the self-study process described here is to assist a staff in gaining their own knowledge and insights about the criteria of quality programs, some ideas from the outside are helpful, especially at first. Outside resources provide a temporary security for the teacher who needs more information about the knowledge base that makes up the criteria of a self-study document. The experience of schools who have used a self-study process is that the best form of outside expertise to use is reading. Reading a series of short, well-selected articles that correspond to the criteria described in the self-study document helps a staff focus on issues germane to their discussion. It also allows them to examine a few of their more problematic areas in greater detail. An outside resource person can be helpful in tracking down a suitable reading for the topic.

***Through guided discussion, reflection, writing, and reading, a staff can grow.***

The arrangement for continuing education credit for participation in a self-study is something both facilitators and participants find helpful. For some staff, working for credit acknowledges their hard work and legitimizes their efforts. It also allows them to improve their position on the salary schedule. It takes time to develop a course proposal and find the necessary readings that credit usually requires. Given teachers' time constraints, this can only occur with outside help.

Self-study schools find that using outside speakers has been the least helpful way to offer outside support. In part, this may be because it takes away valuable discussion time. Through guided discussion, reflection, writing, and reading, a staff can gradually grow to better understand the knowledge base of their field and trust their own growing areas of expertise.

Finding an outside support person may be difficult in some communities. However, it behooves administrators and staff members to seek a consistent resource who has some objectivity and whose time is assigned to offering support. Such a person can be in any form that makes sense to the site. Examples of outside support that can work are: consultant, educational service district specialist, regional agency staff member, university personnel, or staff development support from within the building or district. Their support, although limited, is critical to promoting internal change and guided reflection.

### Supporting and Encouraging Reflection

Brief journal writing is probably the most helpful tool for reflection in a self-study process, but it is the most difficult to get a staff to use. Providing some structure seems to make writing easier. The schools who have participated in this process find that setting aside writing time for ten minutes at the end of each discussion session to respond to one or two open-ended questions related to the day's topic encourages consistent and useful writing. Also, receiving credit for participating in the self-study makes a positive difference in the teachers' expectation that writing is important to the process.

In addition to journal entries, other tools which assist the process of reflection are compiling the individualized rating sheets and sharing them at the next session. When a staff receives the compiled notes, they have yet another opportunity to reflect on their own and their colleagues' experiences and thoughts.

## A Summary of Others' Self-Study Experience

These lessons are complex. But, so is change. The experiences offered here by other educators who have engaged in self-

study suggest an individualized experience. Each set of participants needs to design their own way to go through the self-study process, even when a study document is there as a guide. This design may take some time to evolve and it needs support from the administration, teachers, and an outside resource. If change is not personalized and relevant for teachers, it will not be effective.

Parallels to children's learning can be made here. Although years and developmental levels separate us, examining our own learning can illuminate aspects of how young children construct knowledge and make us better teachers. We, like children, learn best in a social context that allows opportunities to talk about what we think while receiving advice from objective, but supportive expert guides. Without talk and a climate of respect for our thinking, the new ideas may never be understood. Without new ideas based on current research, both teachers and children lose.

## References and Additional Reading


Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R., & Tarule, J. M. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind.* New York: Basic Books.

A seminal piece of work on women and learning that is worth reading for all who teach and support adult learners.

Bredekamp, S. (Ed.). (1987). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8.* Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

This document contains the original set of research-based guidelines for early childhood programs that forms the basis for quality guidelines in early childhood education.

Guidelines for appropriate curriculum content and assessment in programs serving children ages 3 through 8: A joint position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education. (1991). *Young Children, 46* (3), 21–38.

These guidelines grew out of a need to have more specific sets of criteria in all disciplines traditionally included in school programs.

Massoni, B. (1991). *Promoting developmentally appropriate practice in public schools: Self-study project 1990-91* (Final Report). Salem, Oregon: Oregon Department of Education.

The Oregon Department of Education sponsored six schools in diverse parts of Oregon in a self-study process. This is the final report of their progress.

Severeide, R., Massoni, B., & Moilanen, C. (1992). *Self-study goes to public school.* Unpublished manuscript, Early Childhood Strategies, Portland, Oregon.

This unpublished manuscript is the compilation of notes from schools who have undergone the self-study process described in this paper. The notes represent work done in the states of Alaska, Colorado, Hawaii, and Oregon. Information is available from the primary author.

## Self-Study Documents

*Early childhood classroom observation: National Academy of Early Childhood Programs.* (1985). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

The National Academy is part of the professional development arm of NAEYC. This document outlines the self-study process designed for private child care centers and preschool. It was the basis for the Portland Public Schools document.

*Early childhood education: Standards for quality programs for young children.* (1990). Alexandria, Virginia: National Association of Elementary School Principals.

NAESP has published their own self-study guide for principals. The standards are based on work done by NAEYC.

*Early childhood program self-assessment for pre-K–grade 3 programs.* (1992). Juneau, Alaska: Alaska Department of Education, in cooperation with Nome Elementary School, Nome Preschool, and the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory.

Kosena, P., Steiger, D., Godres, J., & Livingston, D. (1991). *A self-study document for pre-kindergarten through second grade.* Englewood, Colorado: Cherry Creek Schools.

This version of an early childhood self-study was written by a team of teachers and administrators in Cherry Creek Schools, Englewood, Colorado. It grew out of their need to make the original Portland Public Schools document fit their local district's goals.

Severeide, R., & Moilanen, C. (1991). *A self-study project: Supporting implementation of developmentally appropriate practice pre-K through 2.* Portland, Oregon: Portland Public Schools. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 338-412)

A self-study process for public schools was created in Portland, Oregon as one tool for implementing major changes in district early childhood programs. This document presents the findings from the first three schools to go through the process and also contains the original draft of the study guide.

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